

## Ecologies of Capture

It is January 2018, and I am sitting with Riton on a rickety dock in Khalia Chok, a small Bangladeshi village on the fringe of the Sundarbans and the India-Bangladesh border. We are chatting with Shotish, a jack-of-all-trades in the mangroves. Sometimes he works as a boatman for tourists who come to see the world's largest remaining mangrove forest. But more often he works inside the forest as a honey collector, fisherman, or crab collector. We are talking about the everyday challenges of eking out a living from the mangroves. These challenges are at once myriad and in flux. Shotish discusses the ways that the environmental and political impacts of climate change are reworking the siltscapes—the changing balance of *labonpani* to *mishtipani* in the rivers, the increasing regulations on when fishermen can fish the mangroves and how. But other more pressing dynamics are also at play. “Now the problem for us,” Shotish tells us, “is dakats.”

“Dakat” is often translated as “pirate” in the English-language press, but its meaning is closer to “bandit” or “robber.” It is often used interchangeably with the terms *jaladossu* (water bandit) and *bonadossu* (forest bandit). In the Sundarbans region, *dakat*—or more specifically *dakati* (the business of being a *dakat*)—refers to kidnapping by gangs of men navigating the Sundarbans's waterways in swift-moving boats. As Shotish tells us, trouble with *dakats* is on the rise. Contrasting *dakats* with the Sundarbans's most notorious killer, the Sundarbans tiger, he observes, “People don't fear tigers. No one fears tigers. If we are alert, is there any kind of animal who will come near to us? But the *dakats*, if they catch you, then you will have to pay one *lakh* [100,000] taka.” The dynamics of encounters with *dakats* are markedly similar. Fishermen operate in boats of three to six people. When their boats are accosted by *dakats*, one or sometimes two fishermen are



FIGURE 20. Drying fish catch, Dublar Chor.

taken and held hostage. They are released when the remaining fishermen pay a ransom—*muktipan*—via Bangladesh’s ubiquitous mobile banking system bKash.

Organized criminal activity in the Sundarbans has a long history, and dakat groups operating under its murky canopy have regularly appeared as bogeymen for both the colonial and postcolonial state.<sup>1</sup> The relationships between dakat groups and fishermen is, in some ways, unsurprising. It mirrors predatory relationships between criminal groups and those who work in their territories the world over.<sup>2</sup> What is more interesting is the way that dakati articulates with a much larger spectrum of transformations in the delta’s present and recent past. Despite the mangroves’ increasing regulation through conservation and other policing regimes, capture by dakats is a pressing concern for fishermen who ply the Sundarbans waterways. How are we to understand this paradox—the seeming increase in capture of fishermen by dakats at the very moment of increased enforcement and monitoring in the mangroves? To do so requires thinking of capture not as a singular event, but rather as constituting a networked ecology—an ecology of capture.

I define “capture” as a form of predation seeking not necessarily to kill, but rather to seize and control.<sup>3</sup> Capture is a territorial phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> It involves the regulation of what moves into (control of space) and out of (hunting and removal from space). Capture is the operating logic of work in the mangroves. Here, anxieties about the delta as climate threat capture the imaginations of international

donor organizations, who in turn transform the terrain of the delta through climate-resilient interventions. Environmental NGOs capture and secure the Sundarbans for conservation and the future of “humankind”—often encouraging and aiding state actors to capture poachers, dakats, and fishermen who work within its boundaries. Fishermen capture resources such as honey, fish, crab, and timber from the mangroves, surviving through small-scale but environmentally deleterious resource extraction. Fishing syndicates capture control of both markets and fishing territories—extracting rents from fishermen and profits from the marine catch. Forest officials regularly capture fishermen, sometimes demanding that they pay bribes or suffer jail time and the confiscation of their boats, the means of fishermen’s livelihoods. NGO and public resources meant for alternative livelihood training and other development schemes in the delta are winnowed away through elite capture. Paramilitary forces seek to make the Sundarbans “safe” for conservation and tourism and, in doing so, capture—and sometimes kill—dakats themselves. The logics of all these forms of capture differ, often radically so. Yet, they nonetheless interrelate, overlap, and shape each other in ways that defy simple causal explanations. To see these as allied practices—as opposed to separate and mutually distinct forms of predation, entrapment, and extraction—is to rethink the often surprising connections that tie activities like the kidnapping of fishermen to projects such as conservation under the mangrove canopy.

In this chapter, I trace these interrelations and linkages to argue that capture is a signature condition of life on this climate frontier. To explore the complex interplays of seizure, release, evasion, and escape—the delta’s ecology of capture—is to better understand the aleatory nature of rule in the delta and the challenges of forging life and livelihood in its midst.<sup>5</sup> Many seek to control the dynamics of capture—to assert, a monopoly on predation within a given territory.<sup>6</sup> Yet such projects are ephemeral, shifting, and conditional upon a broad spectrum of other predatory practices. I situate the delta’s fishing industry—the fishermen who capture animals from the delta’s murky waters, the dakats who prey on fishermen, the syndicates that organize fishing territories of the delta, and the government departments that seek to also regulate and control the extraction of marine life within it—at the heart of this exploration.<sup>7</sup> While there are many points of entry into the delta’s ecology of capture, the fishing industry tells a crucial part of the story of the delta’s present. It does so precisely because it exposes the ways that the Sundarbans’s ecology of capture—like the swampy terrain on which it unfolds—is a protean, emergent system that structures possibility and, indeed, life.

#### CAPTURE ON A CLIMATE FRONTIER

We’re in Shoronkhola, a small market town not far from Mongla. Shoronkhola is a hub of sorts for those who work the mangrove forests. While Shoronkhola’s downtown is little more than an intersection of two roads, it is a constant hub of activity—its streets full of rickshaw vans carrying goods and people bustling to

buy and sell. A particular focus of this activity is a market where crab collectors come to sell their catch. We sit in one of the town's tea stalls. It is late afternoon. Work is done for the day, at least for the men gathered under the tea stall's make-shift roof. It's time to talk, to gossip, to smoke, to chew *paan*, to drink tea. As we drink, Gopal, a crab fisherman who has worked the delta for years, is discussing a range of concerns related to working in the mangroves.

Gopal's is a common story of life in the Sundarbans region. He was born in a village in the delta to a landless family whose primary income came from share-cropping and off-farm agricultural labor. Work used to be plentiful in Gopal's village, but with the rise of shrimp aquaculture in the 1980s, which radically reduced the need for workers, off-farm labor became harder to come by and smallholder agriculture more precarious. So, like many others, he went to the mangroves for work. For years, Gopal fished in the rivers. But more recently, he has switched to hunting crabs. The business fluctuates with the seasons, but overall it's fairly good. "Big crabs are harder to find these days. But if you can get them, the rate is not that bad," Gopal tells us.

Gopal's chief concern is something of a common complaint: Dakats have, in recent years, repeatedly taken him prisoner. As he explains, "Those who work the jungle are poor people, like me. We go there because we are hungry. If dakats take me, they beat me and tell me to give fifty thousand taka for my release. I may have nothing in my house, but I will have to pay them. What can I do? I'll collect the money by begging from all the people in my village."

As Gopal's discussion suggests, there are multiple forms of capture that constitute the fabric of life for a crab collector such as himself in the Sundarbans. At play are: the political ecology of shrimp aquaculture, which has pushed many to seek their fortunes fishing the mangrove forests; Gopal's ability to capture and collect crabs that will fetch a reasonable price in the market, allowing him to keep his family afloat; the realities of capture by dakats who prowl the waterways looking for fishermen such as Gopal. Each of these forms of capture are distinct—indeed are markedly different. But each articulate with each other in ways that have both practical and vital implication.

Dakati, as noted above, has a long history on this frontier.<sup>8</sup> Dakati was once a hereditary business.<sup>9</sup> But in postcolonial Bangladesh, dakat has become an identity that cleaves neither to family nor even to religion. Both Hindus and Muslims become dakats and sometimes serve in the same dakat groups. People drift into and out of dakati as personal circumstances change. Indeed, in the turbulent post-colonial period in Bangladesh, dakati has waxed and waned in articulation with both the region's frontier dynamics and broader shifts in the country's political economy. In difficult and uncertain times, many are forced to take to the forest. They do so not only to earn a living but also, often, to seek refuge from the law, debt, and political and other troubles at home.

For much of post-independence Bangladesh, the state has largely turned a blind eye to dakats.<sup>10</sup> Many, including former dakats themselves, told me that dakat groups had financial links with powerful businessmen and government officials who, for a share of dakat profits, helped them manage business arrangements outside the mangroves. This permissive relationship began to shift with the rise of climate change-related programming in the Sundarbans. Many new climate initiatives simply intensify long-standing conservation measures in the forest. But alongside this new wave of funding there has emerged a set of programs and policies designed to improve policing, monitoring, and transparency within the mangroves—that is to say, to reestablish the monopoly on predation, or at least on the regulation of predation, within the mangrove forests.

Such programs affect more than just the criminal networks working in the forest. The mangroves provide a critical livelihood for many who live along its boundaries and work within it to extract fish, honey, timber, and crab from the forests. This kind of resource extraction has a long history.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as charted in chapter 2, in the past few decades the delta's agricultural (primarily rice-based) labor market has collapsed, concomitant with the rise of brackish water shrimp aquaculture in the delta region. This has pushed many people living along and near to the Sundarbans to pursue work in the forest. At the same time, much conservation and climate change-related policymaking seeks to eliminate small-scale resource extraction from the protected forest.<sup>12</sup> Such programming represents a vision of the Sundarbans in which the mangrove forest figures as a critical resource in need of preservation at all costs for humanity at large, and humans who live along and have historically worked within the forest figure as an environmental threat.<sup>13</sup>

The goal of these programs is to protect the mangroves by gradually reducing the extraction of their resources. They accomplish this through a range of techniques, including banning the collection of timber, reducing the number and duration of permits available for fishing, closing the forest to fishing during certain months to allow marine life to spawn, banning nets of a certain size, and more. Whether or not these programs achieve their goal, they place much of the burden of conservation on communities that rely on the mangrove forest for their livelihoods. These new conservation policies are enforced by forest officials who have the power to levy fines, confiscate boats, and file legal cases (most fishermen describe them as “flexible” in their willingness to enforce these laws). The policies are also enforced by new armed forest patrols, known as SMART Teams, which are run through the Forest Department. These teams are funded through national and international conservation programs whose mandate is to protect the Sundarbans from anthropogenic ecological degradation. Most fishermen describe SMART Teams as not flexible in the least.<sup>14</sup>

The Forest Department forms one pole in the regulation of the fishing business within the delta region. Fishermen must visit forest offices to secure their fishing

permits. They can be denied permits if they have a record of being caught violating forest regulations such as fishing during spawning season or using poisons or illegal nets. Fishermen occasionally complain that they can also be denied if they are not able to offer some form of payment. An equally important force in regulating the fishing industry in the region are fishing syndicates. These groups control the fishing business, its structure, and its pricing throughout the delta. Most directly, fishing syndicates control fishing in the Bay of Bengal, organizing fishing communities in remote islands in the Bay and regulating the transport and sale of fishing catches. But they also shape the contours of fishing in the Sundarbans at large and the practice of *dakati* within it. To understand the delta's ecology of capture, then, we must first explore the rise and structure of these syndicates.

### EMPIRE OF CAPTURE

Goni Miah is a man of strong emotions. Short, bald, and stout, with a ruddy-face, and a short-cropped white beard, he commands a certain authority—one mingled with a hint of unpredictability and, perhaps, violence. Miah describes himself as an old *bawali*, a woodsman of the mangrove forests. But that term hardly encompasses his illustrious career. Miah has been both predator and prey in the forest, though more often the former than the latter. He has made a living as a fisherman, a crabber, a Mukti Joddha (Liberation War fighter), a smuggler, and a local political enforcer. Now he is semi-retired, one of the *matbor*—men of power and position—of Joymonir, a village that sits on the border of the Sundarbans.<sup>15</sup> There, he presides over village politics and village gossip, typically the loudest voice in any debate.

I first met Miah years ago when passing through the village. We were having a conversation about fishing regulations with a Forest Department official when Miah shouldered in, seemingly from nowhere. He began waving his finger under the official's nose and shouting that the Forest Department was more interested in torturing fishermen than helping them. I was taken aback by Miah's brazen anger and lack of deference.<sup>16</sup> Over time, I came to understand that such behavior was typical of him. He often goes from a whisper to an impassioned shout within the space of a single sentence. He will rush heedlessly across a crowded road to embrace you when he sees you coming, spit on the ground in fury when discussing a perceived injustice, openly weep when remembering a lost friend.

Today, we're lounging in the late winter sun in the courtyard of Miah's home, smoking a cigarette and drinking tea. I'm struggling to stay awake and stay attentive to Miah's often-digressive stories as I digest the massive lunch that his wife and daughter have fed us. Miah is in storytelling mode. The subject is his youth. Miah grew up near Khulna, on the fringe of the Sundarbans. In 1971, during the Liberation War, he took to the forest and joined the company of the legendary Major Ziauddin Ahmed—a hero of the Mukti Joddha who led a guerrilla campaign

against the Pakistani army from deep within the mangroves, striking at Pakistani ships and infrastructure before disappearing into the jungle.<sup>17</sup> Miah's memories of those times are vivid. He becomes animated as he talks, shouting his assent or disagreement with our questions, loudly professing his enduring love and respect for Major Zia, who passed away in 2017.<sup>18</sup> Miah describes the many guerrilla tactics that Zia's team used in their fight. At one point, much to my profound discomfort, he has me stand with my back to him while he uses me as a model to demonstrate how to strangle a man with a gamcha, the ubiquitous cloth scarf carried by most men in Bangladesh.

After the Liberation War, Miah tells us, Zia's company did not wish to turn in their guns and fall into line with the Awami League as they set about constituting the post-Pakistan Bangladeshi state. Instead, the company retreated into the mangroves, taking up residence on Dublar Char—an island that sits at the mouth of the Sundarbans in the estuarian ecotone between the jungle and the Bay of Bengal. There, they set about making a private empire, living off the bounty of the forest and the ocean.<sup>19</sup> As Miah tells it, the government was jealous of Zia's power, and sent the army in to bring the charismatic Zia to heel. Miah remembers this as one of many moments when Zia demonstrated his quality as a leader. As Miah tells us, "That night the army surrounded us. Zia knew we were defeated. He told us, 'Go, I will deal with them.'" Miah and his compatriots escaped into the mangroves, fleeing under water using long reeds as breathing tubes. Zia remained to meet the army.

Miah's narrative posits Zia's return to the fold of state power following the Liberation War as a moment of capture, when the illustrious Mukti Bahini leader was forcibly returned into the fold of state power. Official narratives of Zia's life tell a somewhat different story of his relationship to the post-Liberation War state.<sup>20</sup> Following the Liberation War, Zia seems to have departed the region for almost nine years. In 1980, Zia returned to Dublar Char and, with a collection of family and compatriots from his military days, founded a syndicate that continues to organize and regulate much of the fishing business in the delta to this day. As Miah describes it, "The government knew that they could not control him, so they gave the island to him instead." He came to be known as the Mukuthin Somrat—crownless king—of the Sundarbans. Miah, despite his love for Zia, did not rejoin him. By that time, Miah had already moved to Joymoni to work as an enforcer for a local politician—continuing, all the while, to work the Sundarbans from a stabler and more permanent home beyond them.

Miah's narrative gestures toward the complex terrain of predation in the Sundarbans—the dialectical tugs of capture and release, seizure and escape; the complex politics of affiliation and tribute that often structure relationships within it; and the ways that one form of capture often seamlessly shades into another. But it also highlights an inflection point in the recent history of the delta region.<sup>21</sup> It outlines a narrative in which armed and powerful men—*sahebs*—carved out



different regimes of rule and regulation not against state power but alongside of it. Zia's reclamation of Dublar Char marked a moment when the fishing economy of the region—a force that has come to structure the livelihood of thousands of fishermen who make their living from the delta's silty waters—was constituted anew.

#### CAPTURING THE BAY

Dublar Char has long been an outpost and encampment for fishermen. It is a large island at the very mouth of the Pasur River in the Sundarbans. It has a protected inlet on its northeast shore, where fishing trawlers can anchor and unload. On its southwestern shore is a broad sea beach. Much of the island, especially its shoreline, is denuded of mangroves, having been cleared to make space for the fishing business. During the fishing season, the island is literally covered in drying fish—hung from poles, laid out on raised wicker mats, or lying on mats on the ground. A pungent smell permeates everything. Approached from downwind, you can smell Dublar Char from a kilometer out to sea. Up close, one of the most striking things about the business are the sheer variety of fish on offer. These range from tiny, inch-long sardines to massive sea fish, split open and fitted with wicker rings to facilitate the drying process. Small huts that comprise living quarters and workspaces dot the island. Fishing from Dublar Char thus constitutes a distinct form of labor migration that many find preferable to and more profitable than migration to urban areas within the country or across the border.

The fishing season on Dublar Char lasts from October to March. During this time, thousands of fishermen, subdivided into teams of nine, set up camp on the island and fish more or less continuously. These teams are typically from the same village and, sometimes, the same family. At any given time, seven members of the team fish the Bay. The remaining two stay on the island, working to dry, bundle, and ship the fish back to the mainland. All of these laborers work for a mohajan—a moneylender. The mohajan advances cash to the members of the team to cover expenses while they are away from their families for months at a time. But he also often travels with the teams, working as an on-island laborer, and negotiating prices for the shipments of fish back to the mainland, keeping an eye on his investments. Mohajans often own the boats from which their teams fish, though occasionally they work on behalf of someone else on the mainland or are a shareholder in boat ownership. Powerful mohajans own multiple boats and run multiple fishing teams.

Dublar Char is a fisher's siltscape—an intensely masculine space where fishermen live for months on end, separated from their families and from the everyday realities of life and social reproduction on the mainland.<sup>22</sup> There are no women on the island. In the island's interior, a makeshift village with a handful of general shops, eateries, and tea stalls cater to the needs of the thousands of fisherman who live here during the fishing season. Immediately adjacent to this village is a



canal deep enough for trawlers and larger ships to anchor. The fishing syndicates on Dublar Char primarily fish for domestic consumption, with the exception of pomfret fish, some of which are exported. Transport vessels dock here to be filled to the gunwales with dried fish and sent up through the Sundarbans to markets in the delta where the fish are repackaged and redirected to points elsewhere. These transport vessels are owned and run by the syndicates. This is the sole formal role that the syndicates play in the business—moving the catch from the island to the mainland. It is an empire, at least on paper, of shipping. Yet the power of the syndicates to order life in the delta is much more extensive.

The story of the fishing industry in post-Liberation War Bangladesh is murky and difficult to piece together. But Zia, and the fishing syndicate he founded on Dublar Char, feature prominently within it. Zia's syndicate established a home and infrastructure on the island—over time building a system of territorial and economic control that spread inward from the mouth of the Sundarbans to shape life and political economy throughout the delta. Zia's syndicate, along with the small number of other syndicates that now share power with it, are not formal, informal, or criminal in a classical sense. It is better to understand them as paralegal—operating not in defiance of official regulation but rather in parallel with it.

Dublar Char is not an easy place to get to during the fishing season for an anthropologist like me.<sup>23</sup> I spent years trying to get someone to take me there. When Riton and I are able to arrange a visit in the winter of 2020, I have high hopes of meeting representatives of the fishing syndicates I have heard so much about. I am not disappointed. Shortly after disembarking, our friend Monir, who lives in the delta region and is intimately familiar with its key figures, turns to Riton with excitement and beckons us forward. We're in luck. We've arrived at precisely the right time to meet Kamal Saheb, Zia's younger brother, who took control of the syndicate after his death. Kamal is on Dublar Char for a few days. He is holding court in a tented area on the corner of the market town's main street. He sits behind a makeshift desk as a steady stream of mohajans come to him to resolve this problem or that. As we arrive that work immediately ceases.

Kamal is like many powerful individuals I have interviewed in Bangladesh. He is magnanimous, expansive, and an expert in speaking openly and saying very little. His conversation with us is, itself, a performance of power—hosting a foreign researcher in a public space within the island and inviting Riton and me to occupy the seats in front of his desk which are normally reserved for mohajans who come to ask for his help. His lieutenants and factotums cluster behind him as we talk. They are as likely to answer our questions as he is. When Kamal does speak, he offers broad statements, platitudes, and vague explanations that color around the edges of our questions and commit him to nothing.

Kamal, seeming to anticipate my purpose, immediately downplays his influence on the island. He holds very little power in Dublar Char, he tells us. Most of his time is devoted to running the Dublar Char Jele Shomitee—Dublar Char

Fisherman's Group—an organization that manages petty disputes on the island and ensures that no serious conflicts emerge that might disrupt the smooth running of the fishing business. Kamal's bland description underplays his role in the management of fishing in the Bay. The Shomitee is the central system for organizing space on the island. Through the Shomitee, Kamal ensures the orderly management and distribution of land that *mohajans* rent during the fishing season. It further ensures the smooth management of the fishing business, offers a modicum of security to those who labor within it, and provides access to the transportation vessels that connect fishermen to markets. While Dublar Char is nominally government land—owned and managed by the Forest Department—it is unambiguously syndicate territory. The Shomitee and the island itself is a system through which the syndicates capture rents, organize protection, and maintain a monopoly on transportation and market access.

Kamal chats with us about Dublar Char, about the construction of various buildings on it, and about his history with the fishing business. Our discussion shifts to life on the island and why so many are willing to live here for half of the year. His answer hinges on freedom:

Gradually, the number of fishermen increased over time. You can see today that many fishermen come here to work for the season. The easiest way to explain why is this: we are catching these fish [he gestures expansively about him] from the water. These are fish from the river. We are not purchasing these fish from anyone. Fish are free. We are catching these fish from the sea. We do not need to pay any money to the ocean. We pay taxes to the government, but nothing else. We don't take anything from the government, we don't need anything from them. As a result, many would like to join this profession.

Kamal's response frames the fishing business as a voluntary space characterized by freedom. The fish are resources there for the taking, belonging to no one, offering value to those willing to invest their labor in the catch. Here, fishermen escape the clutches of a regulatory state, of stultifying and immutable wage labor systems, of domestic routines of production and reproduction. Kamal's claim maps not only to classic narratives of the sea as freedom but to imaginations of islands as redoubts of self-determination—spaces of maneuver in a world of restriction. Such freedom may explain why some fishermen come to Dublar Char year in and year out—though none that I spoke to other than Kamal communicated this to me. But it also belies the complexities of fishing in the delta. It ignores the eroding agricultural labor markets that have forced poor and landless laborers to migrate away from their homes and communities and into the mangroves, the debt which ties fishermen to *mohajans* for seasons on end, the rigid hierarchies of the syndicates that demand that everyone pay up to a small number of figures such as Kamal.

The fishing syndicates that emerged in the post-Liberation War delta are neither new nor unique. The syndicate's organization is a variation on a theme repeated throughout South Asia. The seizure of control of the fishing business by men such as Major Zia should be understood more as displacements of older structures of control than new formations. Unsurprisingly, this form of resource capture and extraction begets other forms of capture. As fishing syndicates gained toeholds in places like Dublar Char and as the fishing business settled into new and more stable configurations following the disturbances of the Liberation War, dakat groups emerged to prey on fishermen working the mangroves and the Bay of Bengal, extracting their own rents and protection money from individuals and boats on a territorial basis.

According to Kamal, part of the work of men like himself is to offer protection to fishermen—at least to those who fish from Dublar Char—from dakats. Indeed, the Dublar Char Jele Shomitee that Kamal now runs was formed by Zia with the stated intention of securing the island from dakat raids. Yet the relationships between dakats, syndicates, and fishermen is more a negotiated terrain than one characterized by unambiguous relations of predator and prey. This was explained to me by Shohag, the retired head of Master Bahini—one of the largest and most powerful dakat groups in the delta in the past two decades. As he told me, “Honestly, we had a very good relations with the fishing business [the syndicates]. If they wanted to run their business, they had to make contact with us.”

According to Shohag, the relationship between dakati in the mangroves and dakati in the bay was largely seasonal.

Mainly we used to go for that kind of deep-sea operation [preying on fishermen in the Bay as opposed to in the mangroves] during the rainy season. At the beginning [of my time as a dakat], we did not understand that there was a lot of money running in the deep sea. Before that, we used to only move in the narrow canals in the Sundarbans, capturing honey collectors, crab collectors, fishermen. They could give us a very small amount of money. But later we realized that there was much money in the hands of those in the deep sea. So, we went to Dublar Char. Thousands and thousands of fishermen were living there. In the night, we landed on the island. We called the mohajans and asked them, How much money would you like to give per head?

Shohag's narrative seems to suggest that dakats and syndicates are better understood as making overlapping and negotiated claims on fishermen, rather than as being in direct competition. Many fishermen, indeed, take this argument a step further, suggesting that dakats are simply another group that pay protection money up the chain to the sahebs who run the syndicates—that is, that they pay for the privilege of preying on fishermen. Such stories are difficult to confirm, but Shohag suggests that at the very least there was a loose affiliation between dakats and syndicates. Making reference to Kamal, Shohag notes, “He never threatened us. He used to talk with us over cell phone all the time.” In other words, the

post-Liberation War Sundarbans is a resource frontier where fishing and dakati exist in mutual relation.

#### DAKAT TERRITORIES

Whatever the relationship between syndicates and dakats, the two groups have provided a structuring logic to space and to marine political economy in both the Bay of Bengal and the Sundarbans. Historically, dakats served more or less as strongmen in particular locales in the Sundarbans. Fishermen would pay these groups for protection and for the right to fish in their territory—materialized in the form of renewable passes. These passes were purchased from representatives of dakats living in towns and villages surrounding the Sundarbans. Fishermen would then carry these passes with them to present as proof of payment if they were intercepted inside the jungle. Fishermen would also often help dakats by transporting food and other goods for them. The pass system thus highlighted both the relative connections—indeed, fluidity—between dakats and fishermen and the spatial nature of patronage and rule under the mangrove canopy.

Zia Alam, a retired dakat, emphasized the explicitly territorial nature of dakati. “Inside the jangal, the biggest problem is fighting between groups. If there are two groups in one place, they will fight until none remain. So, groups defend the area they control by any means. When another group comes, they start shooting. We had our own area. And mainly, we did not leave it.” This system allowed fishermen to know exactly whose territory they fished in. Alam continued,

The fishermen knew what area was controlled by what group, so they knew who to give money to. They knew it even better than we did. There were permitted fishermen and also nonpermitted fishermen. If a nonpermitted fisherman came before us, he would definitely have to pay us money. If he could show us a permit, he would be able to survive; otherwise . . .

Alam’s explanation underscores the existence not only of territorial rule but also of a profoundly territorial moral economy of dakati.<sup>24</sup> Until recently, dakat’s principal livelihood involved extracting various forms of rents from within the territory they controlled. Such territories were well-defined, mapping to particular rivers, ranges, and spaces within the forest. The boundaries of such territory, according to Alam, were established and occasionally contested in skirmishes with rival dakat groups. The relative size of a territory was proportional to a group’s size, strength, and resources (guns, boats, and networks outside the mangroves). Indeed, the very nature of dakat power was territorial. When I asked Shohag about clashes between dakat groups in the Sundarbans, he explained this to me as a project of securing a monopoly on capture within a given territory. “The reason [for conflict] was to show your power and fight for your territory. I would not allow anyone to come

near me in our range. My group was prime there. Why would we allow another group to enter? That is power (*khomota*).”<sup>25</sup>

If dakati in the Sundarbans was historically a territorial affair, today this dynamic has changed. The emergence of the Sundarbans as a ground zero of climate change has led to intense international pressure to manage and secure the mangroves from unlicensed intruders. As important have been new governmental law-and-order imperatives seeking to eliminate threats to state territorial control. After the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Dhaka in 2016—during which a group of five militants seized control of an upscale café in Dhaka, killing twenty-two patrons and two police officers—the ruling Awami League launched a massive countrywide law-and-order initiative meant to crack down on Islamist groups, criminals, and other “anti-national” actors. The principal instrument of this initiative was the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—a paramilitary force infamous for killing in “crossfire” those it is sent to arrest.<sup>26</sup> These displays of force had a range of intended and unintended consequences. But one important dynamic in the crackdown was to establish legitimacy by reasserting territorial control through publicly hunting, capturing, and often killing enemies of the state.<sup>27</sup> The last few years have consequently seen a stepping-up of policing in the Sundarbans to quell dakati in the mangroves, carried out by both RAB and the newly formed, well-equipped, and internationally funded SMART Teams. It is an open question whether such crackdowns are successful in their goal of eliminating dakati. Yet they have succeeded in significantly reconfiguring the territorial basis of dakat activity inside the mangroves.

Dakat groups are now smaller and control less area than in the past, but their predation has become more fierce. Whereas dakat groups used to consist of eighteen to as many as fifty people, they now more commonly have only five to six members. Because of the increased risk and smaller number of fishermen that each group can target, dakats have dramatically increased their ransom demands. Previously, most fishermen agreed, demands were reasonable—a few hundred taka. Additionally, the permit system allowed fishermen to operate in relative safety inside the forest. Now groups are demanding amounts that far outstrip fishermen’s incomes. As Alam explained, “They cannot control a big space. They catch a few people, but they have to collect lots of money. They have to torture people to get it. If we captured ten fishermen and collected one taka per head, we earned ten taka. But now they have to try to collect the same amount of money from two fishermen.” This places tremendous pressure on fishermen in the Sundarbans. Before, fishermen could predictably work within a single large dakat territory, but new, smaller dakat groups can control only small territories. To the extent that such territories exist, they are uncertain, in constant flux, and overlapping. As our friend Jolil told me, “You may run into one group on one side of the canal and negotiate your release, but then you will run into another at the other end and have to start the whole negotiation

again.” Thus, old moral economies of fishing eroded under the pressure wrought by national concerns over law and order and international concerns over the planetary threat of climate change. In the process, the Sundarbans has emerged as a new terrain of uncertainty, threat, and exploitation.

#### THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CAPTURE AND RELEASE

Kidnapping is only one form of illegal activity that unfolds under the mangrove canopy. As many have traced, the forest hosts a range of activities, such as illegal logging, tiger poaching (for the lucrative international trade in animal parts), deer poaching (for food), and smuggling—guns, narcotics, fertilizer, cattle, and more—across the India-Bangladesh border.<sup>28</sup> Residents of the region, and indeed dakats themselves, firmly distinguish between these activities—described as *do* or *dui nombori* (literally “second number,” but better understood as “disreputable” or “illicit”) business, and dakati, which typically refers to the kidnapping of fishermen. The distinction between dakati and *do nombori* is fuzzy at best. Most of the region’s journalists, government officials, and residents understand dakat groups to be engaged in all these activities. Moreover, many fishermen supplement their meager earnings through *do nombori* activities, sometimes in collusion with dakat groups that can supply rapid and armed transportation through the mangroves and other forms of protection.

Most dakats whom I have spoken with vehemently deny involvement in *do nombori*, especially any illicit activities that could be interpreted as harming mangrove ecologies. Some dakats have surrendered to the government and given up dakati (more on this below). Those that have often style themselves as heroic defenders of the mangroves—intervening to stop poachers and to punish fishermen who use illegal fishing techniques. Surrendered dakats, by framing themselves as eco-bandits, reproduce popular and scholarly imaginations of social banditry as a protest against the exploitation of land and resources.<sup>29</sup>

Dakat groups are typically organized around a single charismatic leader. The groups take on the names or the nicknames of these leaders. Shohag’s group, for example, was named “Master Bahini” because, as Shohag told me, he borrowed the more impressive sounding name of one of his lieutenants.<sup>30</sup> Another range in the Sundarbans was controlled by two powerful groups run by brothers, one known as Raju Bahini (Raju’s Army) and one as Choto Bhai Bahini ([Raju’s] Little Brother’s Army). These groups live inside the Sundarbans, shifting from place to place, occasionally establishing more permanent bases. Dakat groups also rely on connections outside the forest for their survival. They work through middlemen in towns and urban areas in the Sundarbans region, and these middlemen provide them with goods, such as firearms and food, and manage their finances, passing portions of their profits on to powerful elites and government officials in the region to ensure dakati’s continued smooth working.

Dakati enables the capture of wealth through violence and occasionally lethal power. The dakat system relies on both the materiality of the Sundarbans itself and a broader network of parties enmeshed in the region's political economy. Dakati thrives in the Sundarbans in part because the mangroves are a shifting terrain, difficult to map and manage. In the Sundarbans, local knowledge of routes, navigation hazards, and temporalities of fishing and other kinds of resource extraction at once enable dakat groups to exploit local populations and to evade law enforcement. Retired dakats describe the ease with which forest officials could be monitored, bribed, and otherwise evaded. They claim that their situated knowledge of the mangrove's damp siltscape allowed them to move through the forest in ways that government officials categorically cannot.

Being a member of a dakat group is more than just a livelihood. It is also a way of life. Surrendered dakats I spoke with all described their current life as more peaceful than life in the jungle. Yet they also wax nostalgic for the community and freedom of dakati. Women typically do not fish in the forest in Bangladesh, and they are not part of dakat groups.<sup>31</sup> Dakats I spoke with vehemently denied that they ever abducted women. And while dakats rely on women to maintain families and often businesses while they spend months and sometimes years in the forest, most scoffed at my questions about whether women ever participated in dakati. Consequently, dakat groups are intensely masculine spaces. Like Dublar Char, they are characterized by the displacement of women.<sup>32</sup> The masculine companionship and sociality of such spaces constitutes its own form of resource. Many former dakats speak of the powerful loyalties and brotherhoods that emerged in dakat groups. Some described their relationships as "sharing the same blanket." Others readily talked about the pain of being estranged from families outside the mangroves, contrasting it with the forms of freedom experienced in the forest interior.<sup>33</sup>

The social category of dakat is much more fluid than official and media discussions make it out to be. Unsurprisingly, people often drift into and out of dakati as fortunes and opportunities change within the delta. Dakat groups are composed partly through village and kin networks, but they also employ men who flee to the forest for other reasons. Joining dakat groups can be a way to escape various forms of trouble at home—legal, financial, and otherwise. As Shohag described his own reason for becoming a dakat:

There were bad politics in this area. . . . There was constant conflict. I had twelve legal cases against me. I am a poor man. My father also was a poor man. I couldn't bear the expenses of the cases with the money I was earning. I had a relative who was the head of Raju Bahini. He called me and invited me to join him in the Sundarbans. Given my troubles at home, I decided that I would have to join him.

Shohag speaks to ways that the mangroves have been a space of refuge—a zone that could offer alternative livelihoods and shelter in times of political and economic turmoil.



Yet the very act of becoming a dakat often constitutes a form of capture. Consider, for example, Sayeed's story. Sayeed surrendered in 2016 and now works in the shrimp business. When Sayeed was in his late teens, he and his brother, who had gone into the mangroves to collect firewood, were accosted by dakats.

They took my younger brother, but they gave me a chance for freedom. They told me, "Do not discuss anything with anybody. If you tell anyone what has happened here, we will kill your brother. Go and bring food back for us." So I left the jungle and returned carrying food for them. After I returned, they said, "*Bhai* [brother], you cannot go now. You will have to stay here for two days. The day after tomorrow, you can go home. We have some work that you need to help us with first." The next morning, they said, "*Bhai*, go to your house and bring back some rice for us. After eating rice, we will free you both." So again I left the jungle. I went to the nearest village and got rice and chicken. I brought these things back to them. Then they said, "Okay, when it is dark, in the evening, we will let you go." For ten days, it went on like this, this kind *habijabi kaj* [back and forth work].

When Sayeed and his brother finally were released, they found that their situation at home had changed. A neighbor in their village with whom Sayeed's family had a land dispute had begun to spread rumors that Sayeed had joined a dakat group. "Somehow, he realized we were captured by dakats. He told me, 'You have given food to dakats. Everyone knows it. The police have a case against you. But if you give me some money, we can arrange a solution.'" Sayeed realized that he was trapped. Unable to pay and realizing that his situation at home was perilous, he decided he had no choice but to return to the Sundarbans to seek out his captors.

I entered the jungle alone after that. I had no fear for tigers or anything else. When I found them, I explained the situation, and they said, "Okay, let's see if we can do anything for you." So I stayed. I started paddling the boat. They made me pilot the boat as they went about their business. But some of the people they captured knew me. So, the news spread that I was working with dakats. I was a victim of the situation. [. . .] What could I do? I had no elder brother, I had no father who I could go to. And my younger brother and sister had no food. I had no relatives who would help our family.

Sayeed's captivity narrative offers a vernacular theory of power within the delta.<sup>34</sup> Here, Sayeed highlights the multiple recursive relationships between forms of capture inside and outside the Sundarbans. Environmental change in the delta—linked to both climate change and the multi-decade boom in shrimp aquaculture—has pushed the margins for smallholders and landless families up to, and often past, the breaking point. Against this backdrop, land disputes, indebtedness, and legal troubles often push people into dakati—both as a means to escape legal troubles at home and to provide for struggling families.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Sayeed's narrative hints at how release may never be complete; release and capture are dialectically entwined. Dakati here is both a form of escape and a form of entrapment. In

the Sundarbans release from capture may, and often does, simply open into other forms of capture and captivity.

There is an intimate relationship between what happens within the forest and communities that live on its fringe. Those who flee troubles in their home villages regularly encounter people from those communities in the mangroves. Such familiarity can make return and release even more difficult. As Sayeed sarcastically put it, "So when there is a problem there, I come here. When I come here, a new problem happens there. It was an excellent situation."

#### WEDGED BETWEEN DAKATI AND THE LAW

"You will have to pay however you can. If you cannot pay them [dakati groups], they will not give you a chance to escape." We are sitting on a beach talking to a young man named Hassan as he re-tars the hull of a fishing boat.

They beat you mercilessly. They will hold you for four, five, six days. However long it takes. During this time, if anything happens, if they run into trouble with law enforcement teams, then you are finished. All will die. Suppose they encounter a RAB [Rapid Action Battalion] team. How will they [RAB] know who [on the dakati boat] has been captured and who has not? They don't know whether we are fishermen or dakatis. They just start shooting. Mainly, it is the fishermen who die.

Hassan goes on to recount his own capture in sparse details. He tells us that while he was out fishing on a boat with three other fishermen, they were accosted by dakatis and forced into a small canal. There, Hassan was removed from the boat and held for six days. His captors demanded fifty thousand taka, but he bargained them down to twelve thousand taka. While his family pulled together the funds, he worked for the dakatis, cooking, rowing the boat, whatever they demanded. When his family finally sent the money, he was put on another fishing boat, replacing another fisherman whom the dakatis had taken for ransom, and sent home.

Dakati groups are constantly on the move. Their ability to move freely and their knowledge of the watery terrain allow them to avoid regular confrontations with law enforcement. Yet these confrontations do happen. The dakati system has persisted with little, or at best periodic, intervention from local law enforcement and politicians in postcolonial Bangladesh. It might be thought of as a paradigmatic example of the distinction between the illegal and illicit (legally and socially maligned activity) and the illegal but licit (illegal but socially tolerated activity).<sup>36</sup> With the emergence of new anxieties over the Sundarbans's climatic vulnerability, however, dakatis are seen as posing an anthropogenic threat to both those *within* the mangroves and the mangroves themselves. Or, perhaps more accurately, their free rein in the mangroves challenges imperatives and funding streams from international organizations and NGOs. Over the past five years, there have been increasingly regular reports in Bangladeshi media enumerating the deaths of dakatis in

encounters with RAB and other law enforcement groups. Often, the bodies of those killed are paraded as evidence that the Bangladesh government has reasserted its territorial power and monopoly on capture under the forest canopy. As Hassan's commentary suggests, these killings can often be indiscriminate. Dakats wear no uniforms. Who is to say whether those killed are captors or captives?

Yet, as Hassan narrates, there is a more intimate relationship between regulation and dakati in the mangroves. He tells us:

We have two problems. One is dakats. The other is the Forest Department. Even if we catch fish by net [that is, legally], the Forest Department officials tell us that we have caught them with poison [that is, illegally]. They don't believe what we tell them. Whatever they say is right, whatever we say is a lie. If they want to send us to the prison cell, they can. They have power. So we have two fears: dakats and forest officials.

In other words, for fishermen in the Sundarbans, capture by forest officials can be just as disastrous as capture by dakats.

Hassan's observations highlight one of the dynamics of increased dakati in the contemporary moment. New mobile banking technologies such as bKash—widely available in Bangladesh since 2011—provide a means of payment that radically reduces dakat groups' risk of exposure. They now rely on digital money transfers and a steady circulation of boats through their territories rather than on setting up ransom-prisoner exchanges—moments when dakat groups are vulnerable to interception by law enforcement. Frictionless mobile technologies thus also reduce friction for criminal networks, which use them with impunity. While such technologies purport to offer security and transparency, as well as speed and convenience, fishermen are typically unwilling and unable to call on law enforcement for protection, since they believe that doing so is as likely to expose them to additional exploitation by the police. This itself is linked to the profusion of new policies directed at the Sundarbans that reduce the number of legal fishing permits and place stringent limits on fishing practices—further criminalizing fishing livelihoods and exposing fishermen to new risks of capture not only by dakats but also by police and forest officials.

Fishermen in the Sundarbans have long operated on the margins of law in the forest. Yet the profusion of new attempts to preserve the Sundarbans for the future heritage of the region and the globe has undermined their capacity to seek assistance from those who regulate the mangroves. On the one hand, these new policies often necessitate that fishermen break the law to make a living.<sup>37</sup> Fishermen are often quite clear about the relationship between these policies and illegal activities in the Sundarbans. As one told me, "Without [government] fishing permits, what can we do? Should we and our families starve? If we cannot get a permit, we use other techniques." Such techniques include everything from simply fishing the Sundarbans without permits to poison fishing—in which fishermen dam small canals with fishing nets, flood them with pesticides, and collect the bodies



FIGURE 21. Confiscated boats, Forest Department Office, Joymoni.

of fish as the tide goes out. On the other hand, these new policies have made it difficult for apprehended fishermen to prove their innocence. They are assumed guilty of violating forest policy, which can be difficult to disprove. This leads to the confiscation of valuable assets, such as boats, and to imprisonment, onerous fines, and blacklisting, which makes it impossible to obtain permits to legally work the mangroves in the future. Fishermen further argue that this also increases the threat of forest officials who can—at least according to fishermen—demand bribes and subject them to other forms of extortion. New laws and enforcement measures have, then, contributed doubly to increasing precarity for individuals and communities who live adjacent to, and who rely on, the Sundarbans for survival. Such policies have criminalized fishermen and undermined their ability to seek help from law enforcement.

New forest policies, prompted by international and national concerns about the preservation of the Sundarbans in the face of climate change, appear to tighten a viselike grip on fishermen caught between forest officials and other law enforcement institutions on the one hand and dakats on the other. The articulation between these two forms of capture is seen as overt by many fishermen. I asked Miah if he believed that forest officials and dakats were connected. Growing red in the face, he shouted at me, “Of course. They have a good connection with them. They [the forest officials] arrest poor fishermen and confiscate their goods. If they

want to get at more powerful fishermen, like me, they will call the dakats and tell them to take me.”

Retired dakats confirm an intimate relationship with forest officials, often describing taking over their shelters for feasts or for protection from storms—though in their framing it is usually the forest officials who did their bidding, not the other way around. Forest officials, not surprisingly, deny such connections. One expressed his disgust at the leniency of law enforcement, telling me that all dakats should simply be shot (something which frequently does happen in encounters with policing units). Whether or not collusion exists between dakats and forest officials, Miah’s comment highlights a central fact of life for fishermen: the distinction between law and dakati is ambiguous, and navigating it is fraught with the risk of capture.

### CAPTURE AND SURRENDER

If international pressure around conservation and climate has dovetailed with political imperatives to tackle the challenge of dakati, not all approaches to addressing this challenge have involved paramilitary force. The 2016 Surrender Program—organized in part through the advocacy efforts of a journalist named Mohsin Ul Hakim<sup>38</sup>—attempts to tackle the question of securing the mangroves by peacefully bringing the most notorious dakats out of the forest and back into their home communities. Dakats go through this in exchange for a significant cash settlement—upward of one lakh taka—and provisional amnesty. The program might thus be thought of as a trap—a mechanism through which dakats affect their own capture.<sup>39</sup> The program also sends a clear signal to the international community that Bangladesh is taking the question of protecting the Sundarbans seriously.<sup>40</sup> The program has attracted, if not international fanfare, significant press coverage.<sup>41</sup> But just as importantly, it provides a way for the government to signal its success at maintaining law and order—a question that arose with marked urgency in the context of the 2014 national elections, before and after which the Awami League suppressed opposition parties while a wave of extremist attacks swept the country.

Consequently, the Surrender Program is a highly mediatized affair that involves a public ritual in which dakats surrender themselves and their firearms to the home minister as members of law enforcement, journalists, and television crews look on. The Surrender Program stages a performance of submission to state power, complete with an elaborate process of handing over firearms to police officials and government representatives standing behind garlanded tables and curated displays of captured weapons. The intent and meaning of the performance is clear—the act of surrender brings dakats back into the fold of subservience to government. Surrendered dakats described to me in excruciating detail the anxieties of the decision, the convoluted process of negotiating the terms of surrender with RAB, the palpable fear that they might be killed in the process, and the ongoing worry that

the government would change its mind and decide to prosecute their crimes. Surrender and release are as saturated with risk and terror as the act of capture itself.

The Surrender Program has been presented as a highly successful government initiative. As of 2018, it had led to the surrender of 274 people composing twenty-nine dakat groups, leading then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to declare the Sundarbans “pirate free.”<sup>42</sup> Many fishermen I spoke with in January 2020 suggested that dakati had indeed decreased as a result of the Surrender Program. The realities of surrender are, however, more complicated. Long after Hasina’s declaration, Bangladeshi papers continue to report encounters between RAB and dakat groups and fishermen continue to be abducted in the mangroves. Some of these remaining groups may be suspicious of the government’s intentions. Yet some surrendered dakats suggest a more troubling outcome of the program. The allure of the cash settlement and amnesty, they suggest, has encouraged some new dakat groups to form, and it has provoked them to increase the violence and frequency of kidnapping so that they can acquire the notoriety necessary to become eligible for surrender. The Surrender Program, then, highlights a moral hazard of capture—paradoxically necessitating an escalation of violence to secure amnesty from prosecution.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE PERFORMANCE OF CAPTURE

It’s winter of January 2020, and Riton and I are enjoying our last breakfast in Munshiganj. Later, we’ll make the journey north to Jessore to fly back to Dhaka and then, for me, back home to Texas. As I mop my plate with the last corner of my roti, Riton gets a cell phone call from our friend Monir. Riton ends the call, jumps up from the table, and tells me, “We have to go. Now! Something is happening.” We’re already on Riton’s motorcycle and hurtling toward town before I can ask Riton to explain. A group of fishermen were caught crabbing illegally in the Sundarbans last night. They are being held prisoner in the Munshiganj jail.

This is not something I especially want to see. I try in vain to explain to Riton that I have no interest in making a spectacle of others’ misfortune over the noise of the motorcycle. But Riton keeps driving and we are soon at the jail. There, we are quickly ushered inside to see the fishermen, a group of young men, perhaps in their early twenties. They look tired, but otherwise none the worse for the wear. We are not allowed to talk to them, but much to my surprise, they look anything but dismayed at their capture. As we come in, they begin joking and mugging for me and for a local newspaper reporter who has shouldered his way into the jail alongside us.

Outside, the fishermen’s families have gathered. Some of the fishermen’s young wives are quietly weeping. Others are watching the jail or chatting amongst themselves. I suggest to Riton that we leave, but he encourages me to wait a few moments. Monir is on his way to say goodbye to us. While we wait, the fishermen



are released. Escorted by armed forest officials, they are taken out of the jail and returned to their families as a small crowd looks on. I note that few seem overly concerned. The fishermen continue their performances of bravado—laughing, shouting to friends who are there to see their release. The forest officials look like they are most interested in getting the release over with so they can get back to other business, or to breakfast. The reporter looks bored. It strikes me that we are witnessing a well-rehearsed performance of capture and release.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, I suspect that we too may have been drafted into the role of witnesses to this performance.<sup>45</sup> Soon the small crowd disperses. Some head to work, others to the nearest tea stall. We give our regards to Monir, pick up our bags, and depart for Jessore.

The performative nature of this event speaks to the routine of capture and release in the Sundarbans. Seizure of fishermen by dakats or by the Forest Department—as well as evasion of such seizures—are part of the fabric of daily life for those who work the mangroves. The performance of capture—the public evidence that monopolies on predation are being enforced and secured—is critical component of this ecology. Capture constitutes the fabric of work in the Sundarbans. Yet, just because such events are routine does not mean that the stakes in such events are not high. They are moments ripe with the potential for possibly lethal violence, in which the precarity of life for fishermen and their families is dramatized, concretized, and deepened. Moreover, they are moments with ongoing consequences. These fishermen will pay fines that their families likely can ill afford. They will have a difficult time securing permits to fish the forests legally in the future.

Fishermen in the delta are fond of responding to questions about the predicaments of working the delta against this increasingly saturated terrain of capture with a question of their own: *ki korte pari* (“What can I do”)? They are not about to let their families starve. Their education and experience make it unlikely that they will find work in the new export processing zones being constructed in the Mongla-Khulna industrial corridor discussed in the next chapter. They know that migrating to Dhaka or across the border to Kolkata is fraught with its own uncertainties, miseries, and risks. The unspoken answer to this question—“What can I do?”—is that they must adopt new strategies. They fish around the corners of the law. They use tools such as fine mesh nets and poison that allow them to fish faster and more efficiently but have dramatically greater impacts on the mangrove’s fragile ecology. They enlist in usurious bargains with local mohajans to migrate to Dublar Char for half the year. All the while, they deepen their enmeshment in the Sundarbans’s ecology of capture.

Capture, and the ecology thereof, help us see the entanglements amongst processes that superficially appear distinct. In the frontier space of the Sundarbans—where distinctions between different forms of territorial rule can be as muddy as distinctions between different forms of matter—the overt and covert articulations between threats of capture are particularly marked. The emergence of, or shifts



in, one mode of predation creates new configurations of opportunity in a range of others. New regimes of conservation fueled by global anxieties about a warming world overlap with new priorities of law and order to unsettle and remake the territorial basis of dakati. Small-scale land grabbing and property disputes on the forest fringe force people to escape to and be captured by dakat groups. Policies that attempt to configure space to clarify who has the right to prey on whom or what (and, as importantly, how) are moments when exploitation and opportunity are renegotiated and retrenched—as fishermen navigate new conservation measures that keep them from legally fishing in the forest, they simultaneously become more vulnerable to predation by state agents. Thinking about these processes through the lens of capture allows us to see them as at once articulating with each other and as part of the broader ecology of this climate frontier. From dakats to forest officials to fishermen to resources, in the Sundarbans it appears to be capture all the way down.